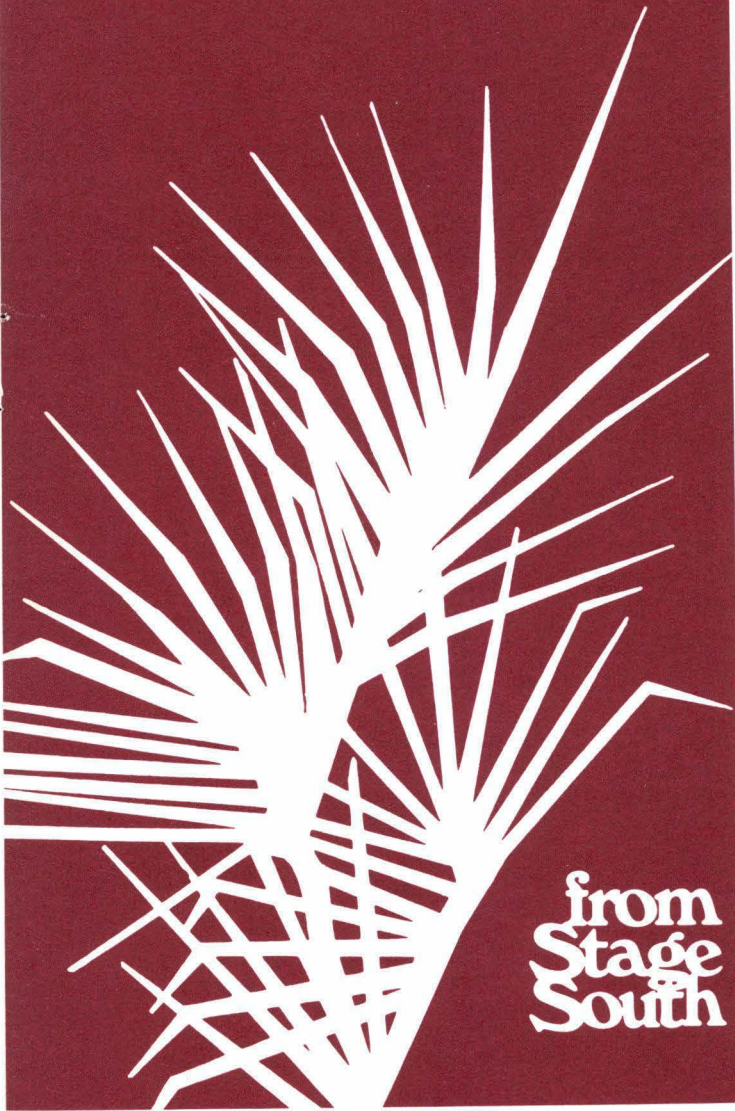


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sea island song



from
Stage
South

TEACHER'S GUIDE

the state theatre
of South Carolina

STAGE SOUTH

presents

SEA ISLAND SONG

by Alice Childress

Music by Nathan Woodard

TEACHER'S GUIDE

prepared by

JENNIFER E. ATKINSON

STAGE SOUTH, the state theatre of South Carolina, is a professional touring theatre sponsored by the South Carolina Arts Commission, and funded in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the South Carolina Committee for the Humanities and the South Carolina National Bank.

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INTRODUCTION: TO THE TEACHER

Stage South's production of Sea Island Song presents a slightly different event from the productions of the past two years. Sea Island Song is in a more traditional dramatic form than those used before. In tandem with this change, the Teacher's Guide has been altered this year. Our intention is to focus more on what goes into creating a play and a theatrical production. Also included is information about the Sea Islands, the Gullah dialect, author Alice Childress (a native Charlestonian) and composer Nathan Woodward, suggested activities for the classroom, and a bibliography.

* * * * *

The essential difference between drama as a form of art of communication and narrative is that drama is written to be acted out, to be presented in a theatre, or on television, or in a movie. With narratives (stories), we sit quietly and read to ourselves, or listen as one person reads or tells a story, and we must imagine all the activity, the mood, the setting, the characters (people or animals) and their conflicts in our own minds. With drama, when it has been prepared for a theatrical performance, we are able to see the characters alive before us and thereby share directly in their activities, conflicts, humor, tragedies, disappointments, and joys.

Plays may be read privately or aloud, but the theatre as an art form is not truly complete until it is performed for an audience. Dramas have been acted out in theatres for over 2,000 years; movies

have been with us for about a century, and television is so young it only recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. Modern technological advances brought us the last two media as places in which dramas could be done, but they cannot replace the unique quality of immediacy that an audience experiences at a performance of "live" theatre.

* * * * *

Stage South, the South Carolina State Theatre, continues the 2,000-year-old tradition of "live" theatre. To do this, Stage South annually reaches out to students all over South Carolina with theatrical productions. Our goal is not simply to prepare the students for seeing a particular production, but to increase student sensitivity to and appreciation of drama as a medium for entertainment and communication. Well-informed students make intelligent audience members. Intelligent audiences create a climate for quality playwriting and theatrical presentations.

An evaluation form is included in this guide. After you and your students have seen the production of Sea Island Song, please complete the form and return it to Stage South and the South Carolina Arts Commission.

WRITING THE PLAY

The process of moving from an idea in a playwright's mind, through the writing of a play, to the final point of theatrical production, is a long, complicated (sometimes tortuous) series of activities. Playwrights create in many different ways. For this guide, we would like to look at the process for Sea Island Song in particular.*

The journey begins in the mind of the playwright. He/she conceives an idea for a dramatic situation which might be developed into a play. This idea may have been stimulated by a story the playwright heard, by an incident he/she witnessed, or by an experience of important meaning (humorous or tragic) which happened to him/her.

Alice Childress was born in Charleston. Sea Island Song is drawn from her understanding of South Carolinians and stories of islanders told by her grandparents. As in most good writing, Miss Childress has drawn upon her own resources.

She started with a very loose "outline" in which she poured out all her general ideas about what the play would be and do. Her "outline" is almost a stream-of-consciousness statement of a variety of ideas. Parts of these early thoughts were developed into the final version of the play; others were discarded along the way. Let's look at a portion of that early "outline."

*Alice Childress gave the author of the Teacher's Guide permission to quote material from the early versions of Sea Island Song.

SEA ISLAND SONG (OUTLINE)

CHARACTERS.....THE MAN...THREE DOGS...THE NARRATORS (MAN AND
 WOMAN)...THE PSYCHIATRIST...THE WESTERN UNION
 MAN (TELEGRAM)...THE LION...THE FEMME FATALE...
 TOWNSPEOPLE (ISLANDERS) MAINLANDERS...

Two people, a man and a woman, try to remember what they can about
 the Sea Islands off the Coast of South Carolina...They, or their
 parents left and went to the mainland many years ago...they wander-
 ered far away on the mainland...from low-country on...and became
 city people...they were sometimes ridiculed as..."them gullah
 people"...had to remind us that "Gullah" is a language, a patois...
 a way of speaking...not a people...

.....

Woman remembers her Grandfather and Grandmother...who were very
 poor...and a story they told that was long remembered from a place
 called Sierra Leone...in Africa...Others may take over some of the
 narrating as they "become" their grandparents before our eyes...
 their strictness is remembered, but also their belief in education
 and her resistance to reading...Man sings..."A reason to read"...
 ending with...So you can write down our story...and send it out to
 others.....to tell our own "Once Upon a Time"...and not to leave
 it to strangers.

Notice that the overall shape of the play is indicated in
 these early notes. This is to be a play within a play. A group
 of characters begin the play by telling a story (in this instance
 a folktale). After a short time, the characters start to act out
 the story instead of simply narrating it. So there is a "frame

story" or a "frame play" and an "inner play." Miss Childress also chose at the outset to use a certain amount of the Gullah dialect and to use song and dance because these elements are an integral party of the sea island people about whom she intended to write.

Next the author sketched part of the introductory portion of the play, including some simple stage directions for setting the scene, the lyrics for the title song, and a brief scene for the "frame play."

SEA ISLAND SONG (SCENES FROM FIRST DRAFT):

Before lights there is the off-stage sound of rhythmic foot stomping and hand clapping and humming. Lights slowly up...a young woman with her arms full of costumes and a basket of props on her head... enters humming and slowly stamping her way across the stage...an old man (in tatters) follows stamping and clapping...doing slow turns, he carries a staff and uses it as a pointer or a baton...does not need to lean on it because he is in excellent shape. Two men carry a cut-out of the front of a country shack...a woman (with a quilt stacked on her head) follows with stamping and hand clapping...She spreads the quilt for.....to stand on...a musician enters wearing a fishing net draped over the shoulder of his denim suit...He plays and.....sings...SEA ISLAND SONG

(The guitarist sings the title song here.)

(Spoken)

GUITARIST

But yunnah not to call islanders Gullah
Gullah is talk, not people...
So churray...throw it away.
Also yunnah not to call mainlanders
Gee-chee, meaning rice eaters. No Sirr-ee,
Man, aw.

After more talk by the guitarist about Gullah speech, and a repeat of the title song (this time sung by the entire company), the draft moves into a scene between Hagar and Brutus which becomes the "frame play." If your students are alert when they see the play, they may notice that there is no character named Hagar or Brutus in the final version.

HAGAR

I remember St. John...

BRUTUS

No, you don't.

HAGAR

From things my mother told me.

BRUTUS

No, not so.

HAGAR

That her father told her...about his mother

BRUTUS

Yes, that was my daughter...but don't go
too far back...stay with now.

M. D. ASHLEY

She'll only remember the good things.

HAGAR

Like a beautiful old story...once told in
Africa...and it lived in old Maroontown...
and on old ships...and told by Angolans...
and then on these islands...in Gullah...
only the good part...only that...

At this point in the play, Miss Childress introduced a storyteller named Kalabari who tells the story of "The Man" (for the character had no name at that time in the writing) while others acted the story out. This development was changed greatly in the final version when the playwright let the characters acting out the story carry that entire portion of the play. There is no storyteller to come between actors and audience.

She also began drafting scenes for the "inner play" which would be used in the final version (with some reworking). For example, this scene between Evelina, Pete, and Penny Candy:

THE LAWYER

I give you Miss Penny Candy!

PETE

Benne candy?

EVELINA

No, not benne...Penny Candy...a jaw breaker
if ever I see one. That's not African.

PETE

Oh, but she's something else.

PENNY

(Turns sign around to reveal
different spelling of name...

PENIKANDI)

Now it's African. (She signs.)

(Maytag shows interest also...
much to Evelina's annoyance.)

(Penny sings "AFRICAN BAG")

Mind what you believe in

Women be deceivin

I ain't so way out as I look

I'm really somethin.....

PETE

Wonderful! Mis Candy, lemmie give you
a kiss.

PENNY

I can see you are a man who appreciates the
finer things of life.

PETE

Culture, art, music...and such.

EVELINA

Well, hie the winda now!

(Her hands on hips.)

PETE

(DRUNK)

Don't stand akimbo...that's old-timey.

From this writing and with more rewriting came the finished version of the play. Very few changes had to be made during the rehearsal period. The director, Leonard Peters, and the cast found the script easy to translate into stage action, and this meant that Miss Childress was not asked to make major revisions right up to the last moment. (As frequently happens with new plays.)

But writing the drama is only the first step (albeit, the most important one). Next, it must be prepared for theatrical production. The written drama as conceived by the playwright remains the heart, soul and core of the entire endeavor. Every activity hereafter is generated by or based on the script of the drama, the words of the playwright.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES:

1. Have your class adapt a favorite short story into play form. (This is a major activity and will take several class sessions.)
 - A. Work up an outline which describes what will happen in the play.
 - B. Decide on what scenes will be spoken.
 - C. Work on writing the play through improvisational exercises based on each major incident in the story you have se-

lected.

2. Have your class act out improvisational scenes of incidents or activities in their lives.

A. Dinnertime at home with the family.

B. Cheerleader practice.

C. The first day of school with a new student in the class.

D. Going Christmas shopping.

The students will provide many more ideas.

THE THEATRICAL PRODUCTION: WHO DOES WHAT

The purpose of a theatrical production is to bring the written words of the dramatist to life on a stage for an audience. A production may be prepared for a play written 2,000 years ago or a play written today; all that is needed is a script. The activity of production involves many people when it is done in a professional manner, each person making his or her individual contribution in creating a total work of art.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Playwrights sometimes have had experience through working on a theatrical production, and they are able to give very useful and specific guides for producing the play. Miss Childress is one such playwright; she has had experience as an actress and as a director. Therefore, she included in her script an introductory statement for the director and actors suggesting an ancient style of theatre which might be applied to this production.

THE USE OF KABUKI style theatre which uses areas of the stage imaginatively, minimal use of set pieces, separate area for musicians, dramatic and dynamic use of high-style costumes, staged stylized movements etc....may be adapted beautifully for folk drama. SEA ISLAND SONG can borrow from these techniques and so give a high style to set, actors, song and story...lending a sophistication which enhances the basic earthiness of simple folk material. We cannot copy KABUKI or NOH theatre techniques but the Japanese Theatre can well chart a course for the uncovering and adaptation and exchange of cultural ideas which brings what we consider "ordinary" people into brilliant, fresh focus.

In SEA ISLAND SONG...let us adapt and borrow the use of masks, costumes and scenes to enhance a "folk-fantasy."

playwright

After the ~~Producer and the Director~~ submitted an outline of the play and began working on the actual script, the next step was for Stage South to assemble a theatrical company to perform the play. Ordinarily, the foundation of such a company is the director and the producer. The producer hires the director and many of the other artists, and supervises all the aspects of putting on a play: rehearsals, securing the location, the ticket sales, the publicity, etc. The director is responsible for all aspects of the production itself: the actors, the set, the costumes, the props, the lighting, etc. Stage South has staff people who carry out most of the duties of a producer, so no specific new producer had to be brought on board for the production of Sea Island Song.

Stage South did find a director in the person of Leonard Peters. Mr. Peters is a native New Yorker who has directed several plays in New York City. His work had been seen by members of the Arts Commission staff who are responsible for Stage South during their searches for top-notch professional theatre talent. One of many individuals considered for the position, Mr. Peters met the standards of Stage South; Miss Childress approved choosing him, and he agreed to take the job.

To do his/her job effectively the director must have an understanding of the play and what the playwright means by the play; also, he/she must communicate that meaning to everyone who works on the production with him/her so that everyone strives for the same goal. Mr. Peters met with Miss Childress, and they were in agreement about the play and the production before rehearsals ever began.

THE ACTORS

The director must select a group of actors who seem most capable of creating the characters in the play as he understands the characters from what the playwright has written. Through weeks of rehearsal, the director and actors develop this most important element of the production.

Because of the unique make-up of Stage South, which is a touring company and is therefore limited to a small number of performers, the assembling of a cast took place during much of the same time that the search for a director was going on. Auditions for actors were held in South Carolina and in New York, and a company of seven actors was formed. Two of them are from South Carolina, two have family roots in our state, and the others are from different parts of the country.

THE DESIGNERS

The director must work with a set designer who can create a setting appropriate to the needs of the play. In addition, the set designer must plan a setting which will be adaptable to the actual stage (or stages) on which the production will take place. Stage South travels to schools and communities all over South Carolina, playing in a different auditorium almost every day. Thus, the sets for Stage South productions must be easy to assemble and take apart, easy to transport, but they must also serve the play effectively.

The director must work with a costume designer who will design costumes appropriate to the fashions of the time and place of the play. The costumes must also reflect the personalities of the individual characters for whom they are designed. For Sea Island Song, Victor Capece has designed both the costumes and set.

Wearing two hats has enabled him, through two major elements of the production, to create both the Kabuki style of theatre asked for by Miss Childress and the atmosphere of life on the islands.

For most productions someone must be selected to design lighting for the production which helps to establish and maintain the mood of the play. Because Stage South performs in school auditoriums, cafeteriums, or gymnasiums, no special lighting has been devised for Sea Island Song. Frequently, daylight filtering through the gymnasium windows is all the light with which they have to work.

THE MUSICAL DIRECTOR AND THE CHOREOGRAPHER

If there is singing and/or dancing to be done in the play, the director needs a musical director to work with the singers and a choreographer to create the dances and teach them to the dancers. The musical director and the choreographer participate with the director throughout the rehearsal period. For Sea Island Song, Nathan Woodard composed the music (songs and background music). Working with director Leonard Peters as musical director was Michael Fauss of Columbia, and as choreographer was Art Berger of Charleston.

THE COMPANY MANAGER

After the final writing of the play, after construction of the set and costumes, after rehearsals by the actors, the production is ready to appear before an audience. At this point, responsibility for the actual running of the production shifts to the stage manager - or with Stage South, a company manager. The Stage South company manager for Sea Island Song is Steve Bordner, who acts in the production in addition to having responsibility

for the company while it is touring. It becomes the responsibility of the stage manager (company manager) to see that each performance of the play goes as the director has planned and prepared for it to go.

THE AUDIENCE

It takes many individuals to carry out the idea originally conceived by the playwright. It requires many artists in many different artistic fields working together to achieve the final success of a theatrical production. The only ingredient we have omitted, and it is an ingredient essential to the total artistic experience, is that of the audience and their response to the production.

Of course, that is why Stage South comes to your students. We are seeking an audience among your students both to educate them about theatre and to have them enjoy this important artistic experience.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES:

1. If anyone in your school puts on plays, or if there is a community theatre in your town, have a student or adult report on how these productions are put together.
2. For a class project (perhaps doing a production of the play mentioned in activities under Writing the Play) set up a theatrical company and make preparations for a production. (This is a major activity and will take time even outside class sessions. It may involve students from art classes or those who take shop classes as well. You might do this in conjunction with two or three other teachers.)
3. Have your students attend and report on other theatrical pro-

ductions in or near your community. This will work for any age group. Almost all community theatres have some productions during the year for children.

THE SEA ISLANDS

Extending along the coast of South Carolina from a point north of Georgetown southward as far as Hilton Head and Port Royal is a fringe of more than one hundred sea islands. The larger, and in the early settlement days the most productive of these islands, are ranged south of Charleston. Most noteworthy of the large islands are John's Island (the setting for Sea Island Song), James Island, Wadmalaw, Edisto, Port Royal, St. Helena, and Hilton Head.

Originally inhabited by Indians, the islands fell to the various European adventurers and colonizers (the Spanish, French and finally the English) who passed through or settled on our shores. The islands served two purposes. First they served as barriers for the coastal region, and military fortresses were often established on them to serve as protection for the newly settled islands. Secondly, they proved very fertile land, and as South Carolina became settled as a British colony, the islands were developed as productive and prosperous rice and cotton plantations with slave labor.

The islands have always been isolated, of course, and even with the introduction of bridges to the mainland, folk-ways, language, customs and religious beliefs have been maintained for about two centuries. During the last few decades, historians, linguists, craftsmen, and students of human behavior have taken a deeper interest in the sea island residents in an effort to record, analyze, and understand the culture and background of the islanders.

In recent years, people of the sea islands have faced another problem in their history as much of the land has been purchased for industrial and recreational purposes. With the influx of people,

not only from the South Carolina mainland but also from other areas, the native islanders are finding themselves faced with adapting to the loss of farm land and lack of economic opportunity. Many have been forced to leave the islands in search of further education and jobs. The exodus places us in danger of losing the rich, black cultural heritage of the islanders.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES:

1. Locate the sea islands on a detailed map of South Carolina.
2. Have reports from the students on the history, the architecture, and the agriculture of the sea islands.
3. Research the lives of islanders such as Esau Jenkins and Septima Clark who have made lasting contributions to their community.

ALICE CHILDRESS, PLAYWRIGHT - AND NATHAN WOODARD, COMPOSER

The author of Sea Island Song is a person of many talents. Alice Childress is and has been an actress, a director, a writer of novels, plays, television and movie scripts, and a lecturer. She received an Obie award (an award given for the best original Off-Broadway play each year) in 1956 for Trouble in Mind. In 1975 she was honored with the annual Achievement Award by the New York National Negro Business and Professional Women's organization.

Born in Charleston, she has always maintained an interest in the black cultural life of South Carolina. Miss Childress is inspired by her heritage as a black, has explored the background of her native locale for much of her writing, and has particularly used these resources for Sea Island Song.

The impressive array of professional organizations to which she belongs, and the success of several of her creations, show the achievements realized in her career. She belongs to Actors Equity Association, the American Federation of Television and Radio Actors, the Dramatists Guild, New Dramatists, Screen and Television Writers - East, and the prestigious International Pen Club. Her plays have appeared off-Broadway in New York, and her novel A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich is being made into a major motion picture, starring Cicely Tyson and Paul Winfield.

South Carolinians should take pride in the success of this native daughter. Although she now resides in New York City, her ties with South Carolina are strong and the quality of her work and her achievements brings distinction to our state.

Working with Miss Childress on Sea Island Song is her husband, Nathan Woodard. Mr. Woodard is known primarily for his activity in

the field of jazz. He has also composed music for other dramas. Presently a brass instructor at the Ethical Culture Center in New York City, he has played jazz trumpet with Louis Bellson and Duke Ellington. For Sea Island Song he has composed an entire score - solos, chorus numbers, and background music - creating a score which draws upon rhythms derived from African music. In addition to his original composition, Mr. Woodard includes two spirituals still heard today at churches on John's Island. Thus, the play as a whole reflects the complex folk heritage of the sea island black people.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES:

1. Do a report on or a reading of Miss Childress's two plays for students, "When the Rattlesnake Sounds" (about the life of Harriet Tubman), and a play for younger children, "Let's Hear It for the Queen."

Both scripts are published by Coward McCann, and Geoghegan.

2. If possible, have older students see the film version of Miss Childress's novel A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich together and have a discussion afterwards.

THE GULLAH DIALECT

A dialect is a regional variety of any spoken language. Gullah is the variety of English spoken by many blacks and some whites in the sea island section of South Carolina. The dialect existed in some form before the eighteenth-century slave trade brought the blacks to our shores, but blacks made the dialect so much their own that it was given an African name.

Two explanations for the origin of the word Gullah have been presented, and they are not compatible. Early in the 1800's it was believed that Gullah was a corruption of the name Angola (a large province in Guinea, in the southern part of Africa). Slaves had been brought from that part of Africa to South Carolina. In this century, linguists have theorized that the word is derived from a group of West Africans in Liberia called Golas or Goras.

In any case, while the name of the dialect has African origin, the dialect itself is Afro-English - Africanisms of speech blended with the English of slave owners and indentured servants from England, Ireland, and Scotland. Because of the isolation of life on the sea islands, pre-Civil War laws which forbade slaves to learn to read or write, and other measures that outlawed the use of African languages, the dialect has continued even down to the present day. Only a few words of African origin have survived in the dialect...with the pattern of African speech still giving tone and color.

Although mainland people sometimes refer to the island blacks as Gullah-people or Gullah-Negroes, the people on the islands are quick to make the distinction that Gullah is what they speak, a dialect, a patois - not who they are. Miss Childress makes ref-

erences to this distinction in her play.

Some examples of Gullah words or phrases and their meaning in standard English follow. The first eight words are of probable African origin:

*Aw - yes

Buckra - white man

*Nyam - to eat

*Yoonah - you or your

*Goober and Pinder - peanut

*Okra - the vegetable

*Plat-eye - a prowling ghost or evil spirit

Bruck - broke

*Hice - hoist, to raise

*Churray - throw away

*Gullah words which are in Sea Island Song.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES:

1. Have your students find more Gullah phrases and words with their meanings and report on them in class.
2. Get in touch with South Carolina Educational Television, Radio Department, P.O. Drawer L, Columbia, SC 29250 for information about future programming about the sea islands.

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(Note especially second half of book.)

EVALUATION

Stage South wants to serve your needs. Please help us improve our program by answering these questions, tearing out this sheet, and returning it to us. Feel free to add any additional comments.

1. Describe your students' reactions to Sea Island Song:

Very
Enthusiastic

Somewhat
Enthusiastic

Somewhat
Negative

Very
Negative

2. Your suggestions for next year's production:

3. Describe your reaction to this Teacher's Guide:

Very
Helpful

Somewhat
Helpful

Not Very
Helpful

Not Helpful
At All

4. Suggestions for next year's Teacher's Guide:

5. Are you interested in receiving information on Stage South's 1978 tour?

Yes

No

School _____

Signed (Optional) _____

Please tear out and mail to Myrna Rodriguez, Stage South, South Carolina Arts Commission, 829 Richland Street, Columbia, S.C. 29201.